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An Appreciation

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Christina Georgina Rossetti

By the

Right Rev. B. J. Westcott

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THE REREDOS WITH THE BURNE-JONES PANELS, AT CHRIST CHURCH,
WOBBURN SQUARE,
IN MEMORY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI.



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Life of
AN APPRECIATION

OF THE LATE

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

BY THE

RIGHT REV. B. F. WESTCOTT, D.D., D.C.L.,
LORD BISHOP OF DURHAM.

WITH A PREFACE

BY THE REV.

PREBENDARY GLENDINNING NASH, M.A.,
PREBENDARY OF ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL,
AND INCUMBENT OF CHRIST CHURCH, WOBURN SQUARE.

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PREFACE.



CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI, who attended Christ Church, Woburn Square, for nearly twenty years, and took a personal interest in its varied work, was born in 1830 in the parish of Holy Trinity, Marylebone. She was the daughter of Gabriele Rossetti, the Italian patriot and poet, and Frances Mary Lavinia, whose father, Gaetano Polidori, translated into Italian *Paradise Lost* and other poems by Milton.

The other members of the family were Maria Francesca, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael. Maria Francesca, who was distinguished for her saintly life, wrote a prose work on Dante, and died in 1876. Dante Gabriel, the illustrious painter and poet, died in 1882. William Michael, eminent in literature, alone survives.

Christina Rossetti's mother, whom she describes in one of her dedications as her beloved example

and friend, died in 1886 at the age of 85. Her aunts, Charlotte and Harriett Polidori, who lived with her, died, respectively, at the ages of 87 and 83 in 1890 and 1893. The latter, who served as a nurse in the Crimean campaign, received from the Sultan in recognition of her work a magnificent gold pendant set with a star and crescent of diamonds, which she presented to Christ Church, Woburn Square, for one of its adornments.

Christina Rossetti was unable during the latter part of her life to attend church, but she weekly received the Holy Communion, and daily united in a brief service of prayer and praise. On Dec. 29, 1894, she peacefully fell asleep in her Lord, whom she loved, revered, and served so faithfully.

She was pre-eminently distinguished for her great humility, the sweetness of her disposition, the saintliness of her life, her changeless devotion to her friends, the transparency of her reverence for holy things, and her ceaseless desire to set forth the glory of God and to set forward the salvation of all men.

The first of her literary works, consisting of poems written between the ages of 11 and 16, were printed in 1847; *Goblin Market and other Poems*

in 1862; *The Prince's Progress and other Poems* in 1866; *Commonplace and other Stories* in 1870; *Sing Song* in 1872; *Annus Domini* in 1873; *Speaking Likenesses* in 1874; *Seek and Find* in 1879; *The Pageant and other Poems* in 1881; *Called to be Saints* in 1882; *Letter and Spirit* and *Time Flies* in 1883; *The Face of the Deep* in 1892; a volume of re-printed Sacred Poems named *Verses* in 1893; and (posthumously) a volume named *New Poems* in 1896.

In a recent review of her poems it is said "She was the finished artist, and her poems, marked by richness of style and splendour of imagery, stimulate and delight the reader. In the sphere of the religious emotions, few poets have given the world thoughts so full of beauty and pathos, with such grace and delicacy."

Her friend, the late Sir Edward Burne-Jones, by request, designed and in part painted her Memorial in Christ Church, Woburn Square, consisting of a series of paintings of our Lord and the four Evangelists, which, with the very beautiful Gothic-Perpendicular reredos in which they are placed, were paid for by public subscription.

The paintings conspicuously display Sir Edward's

characteristic genius in originality of treatment, dignity of pose, richness of colour, and exceptional beauty of devotional expression.

The Memorial was dedicated on All Saints' Day, 1898, by the Lord Bishop of Durham, in the presence of a crowded, representative, and sympathetic congregation. By general desire his Lordship has consented to publish in the following pages the eloquent appreciation which he delivered on the occasion.

A slab of marble from one of the ancient quarries which have recently been discovered in Cefalonia, has been fixed in the pavement beneath the reredos, with the following imperishable inscription in lead :—

THE ABOVE PAINTINGS,
DESIGNED BY SIR E. BURNE-JONES, BART.,
ARE DEDICATED TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF
CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI,
WHO WORSHIPPED IN THIS CHURCH,
AND FELL ASLEEP IN JESUS,
DECEMBER 29TH, 1894.

“ Give me the lowest place.”

Another slab of similar marble, to be fixed in the pavement of the chancel to the memory of Christina Rossetti's mother and aunts, will bear the following inscription:—

IN LOVING MEMORY OF THREE SISTERS

WHO WORSHIPPED IN THIS CHURCH.

FRANCES MARY LAVINIA,

WIDOW OF GABRIELE ROSSETTI AND MOTHER OF DANTE GABRIEL,

MARIA FRANCESCA, AND CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI,

DIED APRIL 8TH, 1886, AGED 85 ;

CHARLOTTE LYDIA POLIDORI,

DIED JANUARY 8TH, 1890, AGED 87 ;

AND

ELIZA HARRIETT POLIDORI,

DIED JUNE 4TH, 1893, AGED 83.

“Lovely and pleasant in their lives.”

CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI.

THERE is a saying attributed to our Lord at a very early date which appears to me to express a divine truth: "He that wonders shall reign¹." The saying corresponds with Plato's judgment, that "there is no other beginning of philosophy than wonder, and," as he goes on to say, "he seems to have been a good genealogist who said that Iris"—the messenger of the gods—"was the offspring of Thaumas," the embodiment of wonder².

Wonder, the direct consciousness of the immeasurable depths of nature and of life with the power of disclosing them to others, is the characteristic endowment of the true poet. He sees the infinite and the eternal in common things, and leads his fellow-men to look upon them.

This being so, it must appear strange that in classical times few women, to whom the devotion

¹ "Gospel according to the Hebrews," quoted by Clem. Alex., *Strom.* ii. 9, 45.

² *Theaet.* p. 155 D.

of wonder is natural, were known as poets, though doubtless many did silently the poet's work. One or two gained a name in Greece, one at least in Rome, and to the scanty relics of their works we must add two or three great songs of thanksgiving in the Bible.

It is still more surprising that in the creative period of English poetry, no woman takes her place beside the great masters¹. At last, in our own century, not a few women have delivered their message as poets, and it has found a wide welcome.

The explanation of the fact is probably to be found partly in social change, and still more in the larger conception of the Christian faith, which has at length enabled us to see that every variety of gift is required for the interpretation of human experience and hope, so that if women are silent the absence of their voice makes itself felt as never before; and therefore they have answered at last to the claim which has been made upon them. For women are different from men, different for our more complete enrichment,

“Like perfect music [set] to noble words.”

On the one side, if we may paraphrase Tennyson's line, is strength of intellect, on the other side depth

¹ Mr. Gosse has called attention to this fact in the *Century*, 1893, p. 211.

of feeling, an intuition of the whole, an intensity of personal devotion.

The poet, I have said, saw the eternal and the infinite. But more than this: the pure in heart have the promise of seeing God. This purity is a woman's characteristic endowment. For women who are true to their nature the work of insight is completed by the power of faith. They are able, however startling the paradox, to bring the eternal before us naturally under human conditions. And as the spectacle of nature and of life grows more perplexing through the ever-increasing multiplicity of details, we stand in greater need of poets who see to the heart of things and regard their "mighty sum" in its unity: who watch for the sign of a fellowship of life between the seen and the unseen: who rise through reverent wonder to a sovereignty over the conflicting forces which distract and distress us.

The first recorded promise of the Lord points to "the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man¹;" and an inspired writer on the verge of the apostolic age, tells of the promise fulfilled when he reminds believers that they "are come to innumerable hosts of angels in festal assembly . . . and to the spirits of just men made perfect²." For the true poet, pure in heart, this vision is realized. He is in

¹ St. John, i. 51.

² Hebr. xii. 22 ff.

fact a seer and not a maker: not one who creates, but one who beholds that which *is*, and declares what he has seen to souls struggling towards the light. For such poets' service we offer thanks to God to-day with full hearts, and pray that the remembrance of it may be carefully guarded for the strengthening of those who shall come after us.

For in Miss Rossetti we recognize the completest consecration of woman's gifts of poetry to the highest uses. The poet, I have said—the pure in heart—beholds the Truth; and sings, not with elaborated music but, to use Goethe's image, “as the bird sings.” This is, perhaps, the first characteristic which strikes us in Miss Rossetti's work. It is, like Wordsworth's early poems, absolutely simple and spontaneous. There is no straining after effect. There are no signs of deliberate composition. Each poem, so to speak, as Mozart said of his symphonies, is “seen all at once.” The melody is the natural expression of the thought. Thus the contrast between “Amor mundi” and “Uphill”¹ in rhythm and language and form, is as complete as in subject, but the contrast is the result of feeling and not of art.

At the same time Miss Rossetti saw all, saw the whole, “the world as God made it,” in spite of the ravages wrought by man's self-will. There is, she reminds us, a sense in which “in each degree

¹ *Poems*, pp. 192, 194.

All things are fair¹." Looking to the Lord we can say: "We see beyond all creatures Thee²." Even now we can understand how all living things are touched by man's sorrow³; and how the joyous voice of human love can drive away the fear of man from subject races⁴:

"So Margaret sang her sisters home
 In their marriage mirth;
 Sang free birds out of the sky,
 Beasts along the earth,
 Sang up fishes of the deep—
 All breathing things that move
 Sang from far and sang from near
 To her lovely love."

The common disappointments by which Nature saddens us, offer when we pause to think lessons of patience and forbearance and hope⁵. These are "symbols." As we contemplate the spectacle of life, we find unsuspected relations and correspondences between its parts. We acknowledge dimly that "all things are double one against another⁶," and the poet guides us to their meaning. *The Face of the Deep* is from first to last an interpretation of the many voices of earth by one whose ears were opened.

¹ *Verses*, p. 131: "Behold it was very good." Compare p. 198: "These all wait upon Thee."

² *Verses*, p. 46: "Judge not according to the appearance." Compare *Verses*, p. 61: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake."

³ *Poems*, pp. 150 ff., "Eve." Compare Rom. viii. 22.

⁴ *Poems*, pp. 41 ff., "Maiden Song." ⁵ *Poems*, p. 246, "Symbols."

⁶ Ecclus. xlii. 24. Compare *Letter and Spirit*, p. 131.

But while Miss Rossetti looked through all failures and distresses to the underlying unity of being, she rated at the highest the value of the individual soul. Each one belongs to the fulness of Christ's humanity. All are "aspects which reproduce One Countenance"¹—

"Grain by grain His hand
Numbers the innumerable sand²."

Even in God's Acre—"garden of confident hope"—

"The Sun, which they see not, doth see
Each and all one by one³."

So she faced with resolute and open-eyed faith, sorrow and death. She does not turn away, like the Greek artist, from that which mars the calm beauty of life. She regards the phenomena of earth in time and beyond time⁴. A heart broken by man becomes an acceptable offering to God⁵. The test of saintship is following Christ⁶. The sufferer accepts affliction as the way to conformity with his Lord, and takes His likeness for his own dower⁷. In Him he overcomes the three enemies⁸. Even in the extremest case Miss Rossetti has drawn a "portrait"⁹ in which we find the truth, that "self-

¹ *Verses*, p. 164 : "The General Assembly and Church of the Firstborn."

² *Verses*, p. 26. Compare *Verses*, p. 29 : "The Good Shepherd."

³ *Verses*, p. 205, "God's Acre."

⁴ *Verses*, p. 122.

⁵ *Poems*, p. 123, "Twice."

⁶ *Verses*, p. 66, "Embertide."

⁷ *Poems*, p. 449, "Why?" Compare *Poems*, p. 434, "Behold the Man."

⁸ *Poems*, p. 232.

⁹ *Poems*, p. 58.

sacrifice is not only the first of duties but the first of joys."

This lesson of self-surrender to a perfect will is the practical application of the present vision of God to life. It enables us to watch in patience¹ when God "bids us love Him and love on²." The dimly intelligible glories of Paradise open before us afar off³. The vision of death passes into the vision of life⁴.

Meanwhile, as long as our time lasts, the sufficient answer to every doubt and every misgiving is the appeal to God's infinite wisdom and love:

"Who knows? God knows: and what He knows
Is well and best⁵."

"Lord, I had chosen another lot,
But then I had not chosen well;
Thy choice and only Thine is good⁶."

In every vicissitude believers without rivalry or restlessness or impatience remain content—

"Content to know or not to know,
Each in his place⁷."

Miss Rossetti rarely refers to social or national problems; but in two poems of supreme beauty she lays open the master-thoughts in which we find the ultimate solution of both. The contrasts of

¹ *Poems*, p. 230, "Advent."

² *Poems*, p. 229, "If only."

³ *Poems*, p. 252, "Paradise."

⁴ *Verses*, p. 130.

⁵ *Verses*, p. 211: "Take no thought for the morrow."

⁶ *Verses*, p. 178: "What is that to thee? follow thou Me."

⁷ *Verses*, p. 115: "Do this, and he doeth it."

splendour and wretchedness, of irresponsible power and helpless resistance, are described with singular richness of language and imagery in "A Royal Princess"¹, and in the crisis of the people's agony the one remedy is shown when the Princess herself resolves to face the furious multitude and offers all she has and is for their relief:

"Once to speak before the world, rend bare my heart, and show

The lesson I have learned, which is death, is life to know;
I, if I perish, perish; in the name of God I go."

And I know no poem more moving in tenderness and pathos, more full of national sympathy and patriotic warnings, than that in which under the memorable title "To-day for me"² we are led to reflect on the sufferings of France after the German war and to take the lessons to ourselves.

"She sitteth still who used to dance,
She weepeth sore and more and more:—
Let us sit with thee weeping sore,
O fair France.

.
A time there is for change and chance;
Who next shall drink the trembling cup,
Wring out the dregs and suck them up
After France?"

Taught by such bitter experiences we have the last secret of time and eternity:

"Love is the key of life and death³;"

¹ *Poems*, p. 168.

² *Poems*, p. 217.

³ *Verses*, p. 98: "A song for the least of all saints."

and following the truth to its source we learn also that the love of Christ is the spring of our love to men¹, till at last all experience enforces the one voice in many forms :

“Turn all to love, poor soul ;
Be love thy watch and ward ;
Be love thy starting-point, thy goal
And thy reward².”

We might perhaps well pause here, but there are two groups of Miss Rossetti's poems which claim a few words as illustrating the character and development of her work, those which deal with the relations of the living to the dead, and those which record the communings of the believer with his Lord. The former belong to the earlier, and the latter characteristically to the later period of her life. Both in different ways give reality to the unseen, emphasizing at once our inability to apprehend the conditions of the after-life, and the assurance of a Divine fellowship which is essentially eternal.

The scenes in which the living and the dead are brought together are unique in their mysterious solemnity. There is in those who have passed away the consciousness of a deep separation from their former state, an opening of the eyes to that which was before hidden³, a sense of retribution ;

¹ *Verses*, p. 9. Compare p. 19 : “The ransomed of the Lord.”

² *Verses*, p. 175. Compare p. 95 : “All Saints.”

³ *Poems*, p. 106 : “After Death.”

and the living now turn away from the shadowy presence of the dead, and now seek it with tender affection. So the spirit who revisited the old home says :

“I passed from the familiar room,
I who from love had passed away,
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarrieth but a day¹.”

The husband returning to his wife, in fulfilment of his promise, bids her cease from disturbing grief and vain questionings :

“What I do there I must not tell,
It is well with us—it is well.
Tender hand hath made our nest,
Our fear is ended, our hope is blended
With present pleasure, and we have rest².”

The injured lover claims the false bride in the moment of her triumph to share his desolation³. “The poor ghost,” standing before her “only love,” hears her sentence :

“I loved you for life, but life has an end—
But death mars all, which we cannot mend⁴.”

But none the less from another rises the cry :

“You come to me in dreams, that I may live
My very life again, though cold in death⁵.”

¹ *Poems*, p. 51 : “At Home.”

² *Poems*, p. 69 : “The Ghost’s Petition.”

³ *Poems*, p. 134 : “The Hour and the Ghost.”

⁴ *Poems*, p. 52 : “The Poor Ghost.”

⁵ *Poems*, p. 147 : “Echo.”

All here is dim, unsubstantial, mysterious, a groping in the dark, full alike of natural yearnings and shrinkings and contradictions. In the communings of the soul with Christ all is clear and sure. The poet tells what she knows, with the fullest utterances of faith and insight. When will and even wish fails, simple resignation to Christ is enough¹. We naturally tremble at His open Presence, but He has brought to us assurance². He Himself helps us to understand the workings of His love³. He claims all and makes our offering acceptable⁴. He is our strength while He requires our personal efforts⁵. To-day we must see Him and serve Him in our fellow-men⁶: His word to us in our uttermost misgivings stands firm.

“Judge not before that day:

Trust Me with all thy heart, even tho’ I slay:

Trust Me in love, trust on, love on, and pray⁷.”

I have dwelt chiefly on the spiritual teaching of Miss Rossetti’s poems. On this she herself concentrated her powers more and more as the years went forward. In this lies her characteristic distinction.

¹ *Poems*, p. 224: “A bruised reed shall He not break.” Compare p. 450: “Love is strong as death.”

² *Verses*, p. 22: “Thou, God, seest me.”

³ *Verses*, p. 23.

⁴ *Verses*, p. 24.

⁵ *Verses*, pp. 26, 27.

⁶ *Verses*, p. 33: “Because He first loved us.”

⁷ *Verses*, p. 68: “He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.”

She is pre-eminently the spiritual poet of our age. She was indeed equally sensible of the manifold attractions and of the transitoriness of earthly beauty. But she saw something in it beyond transitory attractions. She shaped instinctively a philosophy of being. She discerned with ever-increasing clearness that life is a preparation for the open vision of God, and that in another sense life is the vision of God, *now through a mirror in a riddle, but then face to face*. She set herself therefore to realize the reflection and to interpret it. She felt that "in every creature is latent a memorial of its Creator¹," and that "for every aspect of creation there must exist the corresponding Divine archetype²." To recognize these memorials, these archetypes, is to find the eternal truth of things. To bring the knowledge to others was the service to which Miss Rossetti was called, the service to which she sacrificed all, the service for which we now render devout thanksgivings³.

I do not underrate the cost of the choice. We have lost, no doubt, some studies of deep passion, like "The Convent Threshold⁴," not a few delight-

¹ *Letter and Spirit*, p. 130.

² *Letter and Spirit*, p. 13.

³ Compare also what Miss R. says on the "rule of avoidance rather than of self-conquest or even of self-restraint as a sound and scriptural rule" (*Letter and Spirit*, pp. 102 ff.).

⁴ *Poems*, p. 186.

ful parables of life, like "The Prince's Progress"¹, countless delicate fancies and passages of weird music, but the message which we have received outweighs all.

The message is specially one for our own time. The physical aspects of nature, the visible sequences of life, become ever more and more engrossing, and we are tempted to forget that they are but signs of the eternal. The poet discloses their true significance, and invests common things with an atmosphere of marvel and reverence. Simple and ordinary thoughts gain from the indescribable grace of her treatment a fresh coherence and dignity. The mystery of life proves to be an inspiration of service, and touched by the greatness of our calling we welcome our place as thankful workers in what has been nobly called a "world of opportunity and wonder"².

So we are brought back to the splendid promise from which we started, and, under a great teacher's guidance, confess with deeper intelligence than before that "he that wonders shall reign." Nay, we go further and complete the saying: "He that wonders shall reign, and he that reigns shall rest"; for when our eyes are opened to see that *He in Whom we ourselves live and move and have our being* is about us on every side, we shall gain a peace which passes all understanding, and remain

¹ *Poems*, p. 21.

² Dean Vaughan.

untroubled by the sorrows, the perplexities, the defeats, of the passing days¹.

This peace is, by God's grace, the gift of poets—the pure in heart—to their fellow-men.

¹ Compare *Verses*, p. 225.



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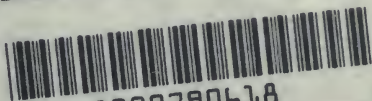
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